

Spyros Papapetros

# Darwin's Dog and the Parasol: Cultural Reactions to Animism

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Picture an English garden on a hot summer day in the early 1870s. Charles Darwin is resting on a bamboo armchair in the backyard of his Down House at Kent, with his dog beside him. One or more women must have been strolling around, leaving an open parasol behind. Suddenly a slight breeze blows, the parasol moves, and the dog starts growling. The stillness of the picturesque landscape is instantly shattered and from the English countryside we are suddenly thrown into the jungle:

The tendency in savages to imagine that natural objects and agencies are animated by spiritual or living essences, is perhaps illustrated by a little fact which I once noticed: my dog, a full grown and very sensible animal, was lying on the lawn during a hot and still day; but at a little distance a slight breeze occasionally moved an open parasol, which would have been wholly disregarded by the dog, had any one stood near it. As it was, every time that the parasol slightly moved, the dog growled fiercely and barked. He must, I think, have reasoned to himself in a rapid and unconscious manner, that movement without any apparent cause indicated the presence of some strange living agent, and no stranger had a right to be on his territory.<sup>1</sup>

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While sitting in his garden, Darwin might have been ruminating on his recent reading of descriptions of animist religions in “primitive societies” by nineteenth-century British anthropologists, such as Edward Tylor, Herbert Spencer, and John Lubbock, all of whom are cited in the scientist’s footnotes in the same section as the story of the dog.<sup>2</sup> In the ethnographic accounts collected in such narratives, it is not parasols, but trees, bamboo shoots, and seashells that sway, hiss, or whistle, eliciting the defensive reactions of the fearful “savages.” Such auditory illusions were considered by Covent Garden anthropologists to be the very origins of animistic beliefs – a perfect aural supplement to Darwin’s own anthropological observation in his garden.<sup>3</sup>

It is as if the dog’s growl crossed a line between different topographies: animal and human, “savage” and civilized, textual and real. Darwin himself attempts to anthropomorphize his dog: “full grown and very sensible” as well as capable of rationalizing the agency of movement.<sup>4</sup> The dog, in turn, momentarily animalizes Darwin’s mind, causing his thoughts to swerve and forcing him to identify reason as, essentially, an animal defense. The dog no longer represents a domestic animal but a radically

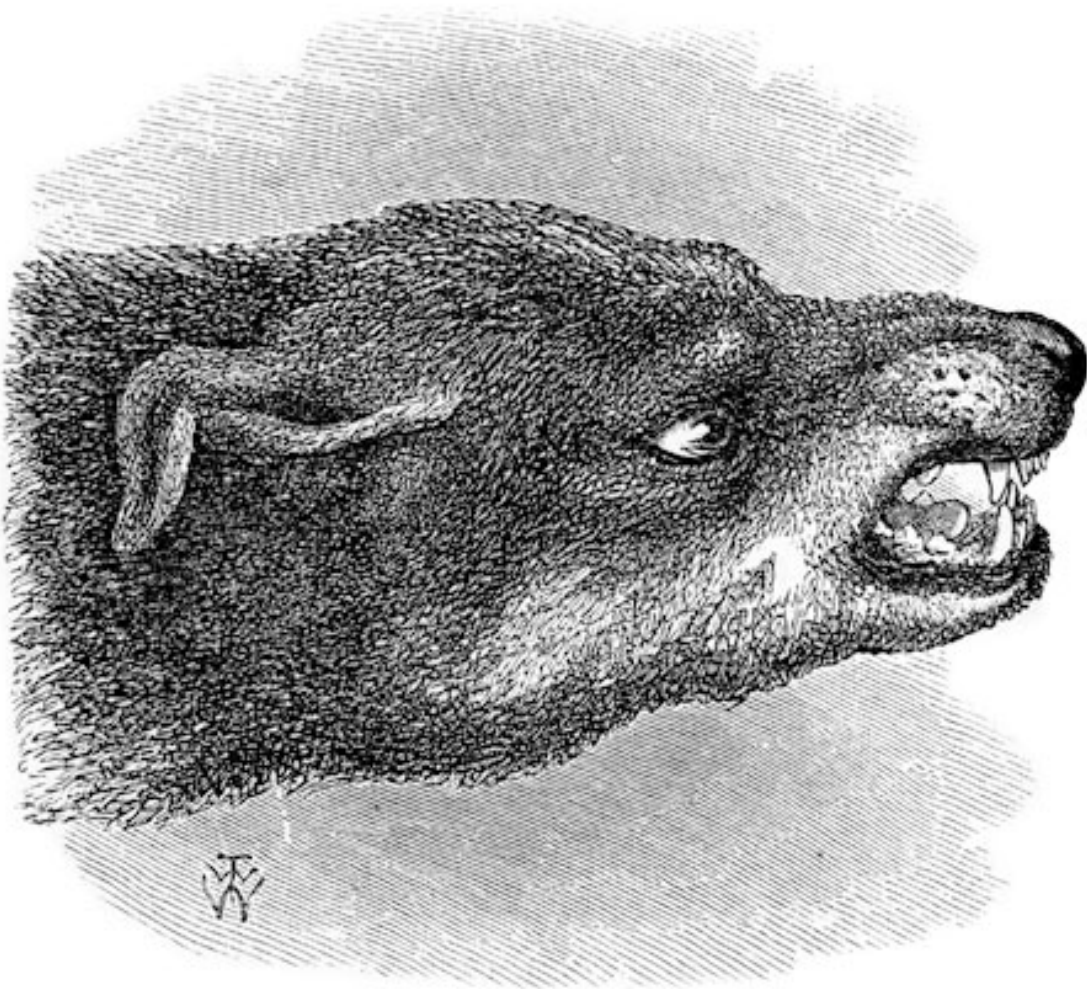


Fig. 14. Head of snarling Dog. From life, by Mr. Wood.

Figure 14, "Head of Snarling Dog. From life by Mr. Wood," from the book by Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Men and Animals*.

disruptive form of animality. Its growling is similar to a pre-linguistic sign, such as mumbling, trying (and failing) to fully articulate a reaction.

Following Darwin, the absence of human agency in the production of movement causes the dog to “unconsciously” bestow a living power on the parasol. The animation of the object is predicated on the momentary suspension of human presence. But here the human factor is essentially elided in more than one register. The “living agent” intuited by the dog behind (or inside) the parasol is evidently not human; it is rather another animal – or even something fundamentally unknowable, which triggers the hostile reaction. Animation is then not only about the uninvited “intrusion” of the object into the territory of the animal, but also the sudden reappearance of the animal within the territory of the human. Animism becomes animalism, and animation provokes animalization. The back and forth swaying of the parasol redraws these anthropological perspectives.

Darwin’s brief animal example must have made quite an impression on his contemporaries. The growling of his dog not only echoes earlier anthropological descriptions, but also provokes new ones from the very class of anthropologists cited by the scientist. For example, in a chapter on “The ideas of the animate and the inanimate” from the first volume of his *Principles of Sociology*, Herbert Spencer would add his own reactions to the episode described by Darwin. Spencer in general rejects Tylor’s doctrine of animism as the belief in “life” attributed to movement because, as Spencer claims, both men and “superior animals” are able to distinguish “living” from “merely moving” things by evaluating the “spontaneity of motion.”<sup>5</sup> While birds or cattle browsing in the field were once alarmed by the presence of the railway, in contemporary times, claims Spencer, whenever a train passes, the same animals continue to graze, unruffled:

Converse evidence is yielded by the behaviour of a dog mentioned by Mr. Darwin. Like others of his kind, and like superior animals generally, he was regardless of the swaying flowers and the leaves occasionally rustled by the summer breeze. But there happened to be on the lawn an opened parasol. From time to time the breeze stirred this; and when it did so, the dog growled fiercely and barked. Conscious, as his experiences had made him, that the familiar agency which he felt raising his own hair, sufficed also to move the leaves about, and that consequently their motion was not self-produced, he had

not observed so large a thing as a parasol thus moved. Hence arose the idea of some living power – an intruder.<sup>6</sup>

Spencer’s dog is even more rational than Darwin’s (even if both authors refer to the same animal). The philosopher’s canine is fully capable of deciphering the agency of movement and distinguishing the animate from the inanimate based on empirical observation. For the mental evolutionist, the parasol incident was simply a momentary “error,” and even humans can temporarily err. Animation is then presented as an occasional lapse of our rational faculties; it signifies the reanimation of a primitive mentality, into which civilized subjects can, only under extraordinary circumstances, occasionally relapse.

### I. Animation: Static and Dynamic

While Spencer refutes the animation of objects, his own description becomes more animated by the implementation of contextual details. The “flowers,” the “leaves,” the dog’s “own hair” – none of which were present in Darwin’s original description – here emerge, fusing reality with imagination. As Aby Warburg would later prove in his dissertation on Botticelli’s representation of “accessories in motion,” animation thrives by the flourishing of peripheral details following a state of epistemological suspension.

Darwin’s animal example becomes further embellished in the interpretation offered by Tito Vignoli, the animal psychologist whose book *Myth and Science* (1880) was an influential source for the young Warburg.<sup>7</sup> Vignoli had apparently read about the dog and the parasol in Spencer, yet he enhances the biologist’s description with new insights:

For if the dog were frightened and agitated by the movement of the umbrella, or ran away, as Herbert Spencer tells us, from the stick which had hurt him while he was playing with it, it was because an unusual movement of pain produced by an object to which habit had rendered him indifferent, aroused in the animal the congenital sense of the intentional subjectivity of phenomena, and this is really the first stage of myth, and of its subsequent form of fetishism.<sup>8</sup>

For Vignoli animism is not an instantaneous lapse into the animal, as it was for Darwin; nor is it a momentary suspension of rational faculties, as it was for Spencer. Animism for the animal psychologist is an ongoing “myth-making” impetus, deeply embedded in the organic memory of the living being. For Vignoli, it is

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primarily pain that revives the experience of animation. While pricking the animal skin, the formerly unseen “stick” (the material signifier of the parasol) stirs the concentric circles of disquiet that engulf the organism from within.<sup>9</sup>

As an animal psychologist, Vignoli was particularly interested in the response of animals to inanimate objects in movement, which he investigated in a series of experiments that he describes in detail in *Myth and Science*. The scientist would, for example, insert an “unfamiliar object” which he would then move by a “simple arrangements of strings” inside the cages of “birds, rabbits, moles, and other animals”; or he would also instruct one of his assistants to hide among the hedges and interrupt the path of a running horse by brandishing “a white handkerchief” attached on a stick to test how the animal would react.<sup>10</sup> Vignoli concluded that the animals’ responses to the movement of objects correspond in two modes of animation or “*Belebung*” – the experience of infusing life into an object. The first animation Vignoli called *static*, and the second *dynamic*. In static animation, “the sentient animal subject remains tranquil.” While the act of vivification has a tremendous impact on the animal’s mind, the living creature shows no “external signs” of it. While extraordinarily intense, psychological response remains physically muted. In dynamic animation, Vignoli observes the reverse behavior: the animal expresses the overwhelming effect of the object

“with violent gestures, cries, and other animated signs ... as if the inanimate object were another real animal.”<sup>11</sup> Such would evidently be the case of the violent reaction of Darwin’s dog to the swaying parasol. In the static mode, animation is an imperceptible trembling, while in the dynamic one, a violently arrested form. Unlike all previous authors, Vignoli makes clear that animation is not necessarily associated with external movement, but it can also be intensely present in inertia.

In his working notes and in his copy of the German translation of Vignoli’s book, the art and cultural historian Aby Warburg underlines precisely the scientist’s two types of animation.<sup>12</sup> Warburg essentially combined the static and dynamic aspects of animation in the singular gesture of the “pathos formula” or “*Pathosformel*” – an ancient pictorial device that transforms a vital bodily reaction provoked by an impending mortal danger into a stylized pattern of expression. In Warburg, dynamic animation becomes essentially static by its form of expenditure. And it is in a similarly expressive gesture – albeit a textual one – performed by Warburg himself that we may witness the poignant conclusion to the episode of Darwin’s growling dog and the parasol.

During his student days in Florence in the late 1880s, Warburg read Darwin extensively, as well as Vignoli. Among his lengthy notes on Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals* there is one page on “dogs” (*Hunde*).



Animated sequence of a dog galloping. Photos by Eadweard Muybridge, first published in the book by the same author *Animal Locomotion* (1887).

Here, Warburg refers to a page of the English edition of Darwin's book that includes the engraving of "a snarling dog." (image above) The same cluster of transcriptions and comments includes references to Darwin's *Descent of Man* and Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*.<sup>13</sup>

## II. Reanimations

Nearly thirty-five years later, in March 1923, while receiving treatment for his mental breakdown at Ludwig Binswanger's sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, Warburg composed an autobiographical fragment in preparation for his well-known lecture on Pueblo dance rituals. In a passage from this text that refers to mythical conceptions of causality, Warburg notes: "When a door screeches because of an air current, this excitation provokes in the savage or in the infant a sentiment of anxiety." And here, in a spontaneous association, the art historian exclaims: "The dog growls!" (*Der Hund knurrt!*)<sup>14</sup>

Three and a half decades after the art historian had first read Darwin and Vignoli, the dog's growl reverberates as a mental reflex – just as Darwin had originally perceived it in his own autobiographical memoir. As in Vignoli, animation for Warburg represents the reanimation of a phobic memory *engram*. As opposed to the liberating protraction experienced by the Pueblo dancers in their identification with nature, animation for Warburg and Vignoli is transformed into a phobic contraction, the memory of which is as painful as the original event.

From Warburg to Vignoli to Spencer and back to Darwin the same animal cry ricochets from one text to the next. The animated event becomes part of a historiographic legend that amplifies the original incident. All four of the authors associate the dog's growl with the idea of causality. But contrary to all of them, one might argue that the spasmodic reaction of the dog is motivated by the very inability to find a cause. The moving artifact can offer no answer to the question of agency, but it can further procreate this and other questions. The dog would have to attack and destroy the parasol, only to discover there is nothing behind its beckoning surface.

I would then finally argue that Darwin's dog is *not* barking at the parasol; instead, it is barking at itself out of frustration. The dog's hostile reaction stems from its inability to decipher the enigmatic object treading on its territory. The response of late nineteenth-century European thinkers to the phenomenon of animation is perhaps not much different. The reason that anthropologists and mental evolutionists, like Spencer and Darwin, appear so puzzled by the dog's cry is because they

themselves are fundamentally perturbed by the enigmatic intrusion of animated artifacts within their own cultural ground. The dog's growl resonates with their own ambivalence towards a strangely familiar animistic mentality that, while omnipresent in both archaic and technologically advanced societies, they dismiss as irrational and animal-like.

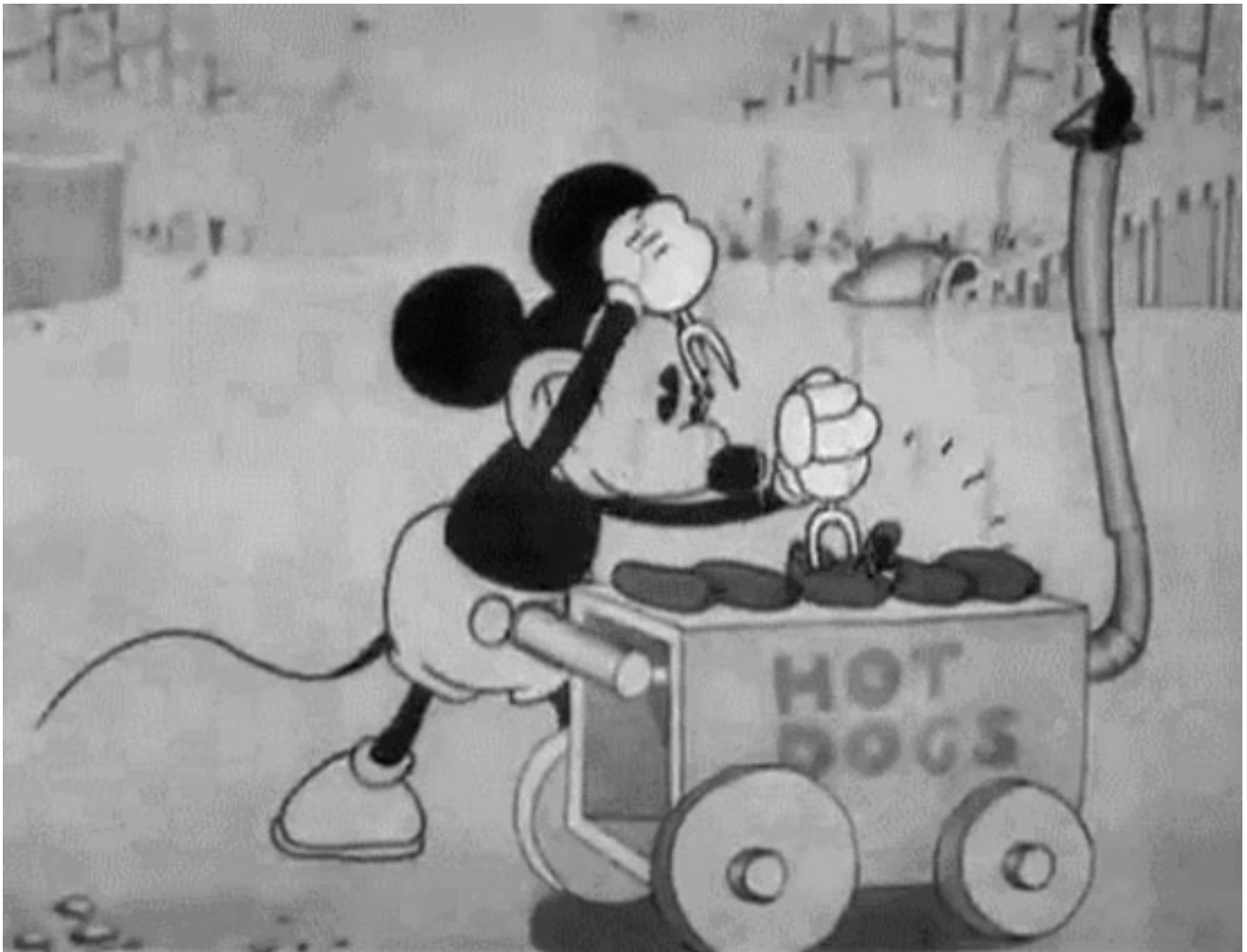
Invented as an apparatus of climatic temperance, the parasol serves now as an ideogram of cultural intemperance. It oscillates not only by the breeze, but also by the psychological ambivalence of its users – no wonder that its slight swaying would end up causing such a stir.

## III. You live and do me nothing?

Let us now consider the epigram "You live and do nothing to me" (*Du lebst und thust mir nichts*) used as a motto by Warburg on the first page of his unpublished manuscript on aesthetics, originally titled *Foundational Fragments for a Monistic Psychology of Art* and written between 1888 and 1903. In this highly disparate collection of over four-hundred and thirty aphorisms, one of the overarching themes is the shifting relation between the experiencing subject and the object through the mediation of the image.<sup>15</sup>

"You live and do nothing to me": a statement in which the art historian addresses an object as if it were a living being. But how much confidence can we bestow upon this "nothing"? Is it not the object's status as a living entity that enables it to do something? And does not the very act of talking to an inert thing empower it with the agency of hearing? Could the subject's denial then be a form of exorcism against all the things that objects *can* do, the harm that they are capable of inflicting? And would not this refutation ultimately provoke a response by that inert interlocutor that is condemned to say or do "nothing"?

Warburg's intellectual biographer Ernst Gombrich translates the epigram as "You live and do me no harm," which presupposes that the only thing that an object can do is "harm" rather than good (and which, most likely, was also Warburg's presupposition).<sup>16</sup> However, the phrase itself is much more ambiguous than this unequivocal assertion. Firstly, who is the person that speaks: a subject, an art historian, or the unconscious? Why does it appear only as the recipient – "to me" (*mir*) – of the object's tentative action? But then does the "You" (*Du*) refer to another subject or an object, and if it is an object, is it a physical artifact or a two-dimensional image? Or could it simply be anything that could eventually be perceived as "living" – a general perception of aliveness? But the most ambiguous word in this small sentence is the "*und*" in the middle of the



From the Walt Disney animation *Mickey's follies*, 1929.

original phrase, which can entirely change the meaning of the statement: are we to understand it as a merely paratactic “and” or as an appositive conjunction, such as “yet,” “but,” or “even though”?

Either “You live and (because you live) you can do nothing to me,” or “You live, yet despite the fact that you live you can do me nothing.” In the first case, the phrase demonstrates our empathetic attachment to things that give a general semblance of life by appearing life-like. Following empathy theorists such Friedrich Theodor and Robert Vischer, whom Warburg was avidly reading at the time, humans have a tendency to empathize with things that look like them, such as objects with curved shapes that give a semblance of organic life. And yet, the object of organic form is merely “lively” but not actually living; therefore, even if it appears capable of “doing things,” it can essentially do “nothing.”

Following Vignoli, Warburg considers that in real life animals and humans perceive everything that looks alive or merely moving as “hostile” and potentially harmful.<sup>17</sup> *But not in art.* Art (or at least Western art) allows us to have representations of “life in motion” (*Bewegtes Leben*) that are not threatening. The subject is pacified by encountering “living” things that are essentially harmless. The lively images of turn-of-the-century Western representations exorcise the animistic power that artifacts have in tribal cultures. The “you” (or *du*) of Warburg’s motto could then entail all three possibilities of being a subject, an object, and an image; but it is ultimately the image that absorbs, inflects, or nullifies all previous agencies and mediates our communication with both subjects and objects.

“Here,” adds Warburg in a note scribbled underneath his motto, “lies the idea of Distancing” (*Entfernung*).<sup>18</sup> By turning the “living” object into a lively image, our once empathetic identification with it transitions into a seemingly safe abstraction. Like most of his contemporary theories of empathy, Warburg’s motto is a defensive response against the animistic properties of the object – a reassuring assertion that seeks to pacify the terror of agency in a category of being that is radically different from our own. Instead of being confronted with real life (*Leben*), the subject rejoices in the graceful liveliness (*Lebendigkeit*) of animated images. Cartoons then could be the antipode of Darwin’s parasol.

But we could also read Warburg’s phrase in reverse. What happens when an object does *not* live or does not seem to be living? What is the impact of images or artifacts that do not appear lively, but dead? Perhaps the art historian’s statement demonstrates not only our sympathy

with things that are seemingly alive, but also our fundamental dread of things that appear lifeless or inorganic. Western art knew for centuries that in order to obliterate the enigmatic power of an object, the trick was to infuse it with life, to strip the *thing* of all its deathly connotations. That is exactly the task that modern art and architecture, having absorbed the lesson of the primitive fetish, have forsaken. Modern art-industry has discovered that in order to keep the human subject under its spell it has to unleash the auratic power of death that the artifact innately carries with it.<sup>19</sup> In their illusive inertia and animated inorganicism, modern artifacts whisper vindictively in Warburg’s ear: “I may not live, yet I can do *anything* I want to you!” “*I can – you can:*” the object now does the talking.

The article is based on material from my book *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life*, forthcoming by University of Chicago Press in summer 2012.

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- 1  
Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, vol. 1 (1871; repr. New York: Appleton & Co., 1873), 64-5.
- 2  
Ibid., 64.
- 3  
See the entry "Animism" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 1910-1911, 53-5.
- 4  
For the presence of dogs in Darwin's texts, see Kay Harel, "It's Dogged as Does It: A Biography of the Everpresent Canine in Charles Darwin's Days," *Southwest Review* 93, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 368-78.
- 5  
Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1 (1876; New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1897), 125-33.
- 6  
Ibid., 127.
- 7  
Tito Vignoli, *Myth and Science: An Essay*, (1880; New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1882). For the original Italian edition see *Mito e Scienza* (Milan: Dumolard, 1879). For the contemporary German edition see *Mythus und Wissenschaft: eine Studie* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1880). For the young Warburg's reading of Vignoli see Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 68-71.
- 8  
Vignoli, *Myth and Science*, 162.
- 9  
Though drawing more from Leibniz than Darwin, a century later Gilles Deleuze would again invoke the example of the "stick" and the dog: "a man has tiptoed up to the dog from behind, when he has raised the instrument in order to strike it then upon the dog's body." The impression of "the stick being raised up" makes "the animal always look about" anxiously; "it is the soul that watches out," with "the animal or animated state par excellence" being "disquiet." Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 56.
- 10  
Vignoli, *Myth and Science*, 58-9 and 119.
- 11  
Ibid., 57.
- 12  
See the copy of Vignoli's *Mythus und Wissenschaft* in the library of the Warburg Institute, p. 50, and Warburg Institute Archive, London (WIA) Zettelkasten (ZK) No. 41 "Aesthetik."
- 13  
Figure 14, "Head of Snarling Dog. From life by Mr. Wood," in

- Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Men and Animals* (London: J. Murray, 1872; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 117. Citations refer to the 1965 edition. For Warburg's notes on Darwin's book, see Warburg Institute Archive (WIA), Zettelkasten (ZK) No. 1, *Ausdruckskunde* 001/000038-62.
- 14  
Aby Warburg, "Reise Erinnerungen aus dem Gebiet der Pueblos," WIA III. 93.4, p. 26. A large section of the same passage is cited in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 217-18. An English translation of Warburg's draft has been published as "A Journey through the Pueblo Region," in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (Cambridge, Mass: Zone, 2004), 310.
  - 15  
Aby Warburg, *Ae.[sthetik]*, WIA, Zettelkasten (unnumbered) and "Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistischen Kunstpsychologie," WIA, III.43.1-3.
  - 16  
Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 71.
  - 17  
In one of his aesthetic aphorisms written on September 14, 1890, Warburg noted: "Two periods can be distinguished in man's perception of objects: 1. Anything alive is assumed to be hostile (*Alles Lebende wird als feindlich angenommen*) and capable of movement and pursuit, so that a position is taken up accordingly 2. Anything alive is examined for the limitation of its movement, law, force. It turns out that man is not only a beast of prey but also a slothful creature." See WIA, III.43.3, "Grundlegende Bruchstücke," pp. 39-40; also cited in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 76.
  - 18  
Warburg, "Grundlegende Bruchstücke," WIA, III.43.3, p. 1
  - 19  
For a different view of that polarity, see T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 235-36.